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ABSTRACT

A professional family life or youth development educator can function as a mentor to natural community leaders. The most important task of the professional educator may be to make the volunteers aware of how much they know and to encourage them to follow through on their own beliefs. Because of the limited emotional and spiritual energy available to volunteers living in disadvantaged situations, educators could use strategies that focus on mutual respect and encouragement. Specific strategies that focus on encouragement are as follows: (1) respect the individual with whom one works; (2) recognize efforts; (3) display effective communication skills; (4) maintain confidentiality; (5) keep expectations realistic and break tasks down so they are achievable; (6) project faith in one's volunteers; (7) respect the strengths in each volunteer with whom one works; (8) find as many positives in a negative situation as possible; (9) be prepared with programming, resources, and answers to questions; and (10) get to know the neighborhood in which you are working. (YLB)

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BUILDING COMMUNITY- BASED COALITIONS

IDEAS THAT ENCOURAGE

Strategies To Strengthen Volunteers Living In At-Risk Neighborhoods

In every community struggling with limited resources, there are those who are natural leaders, despite the difficulties of their own lives. They have the potential to help move their communities toward a better quality of life. They may need help themselves in order to realize this potential fully. Though skilled and successful in their own family lives, they may hesitate to intervene in the lives of others. They may lack some of the information they need to effect change in the community. They may not feel qualified to work with neighborhood youth. They need reinforcement of their own attempts to help.

A professional family life or youth development educator can function as a mentor to these natural community leaders. The educator, in addition to being a teacher, can act as a role model for the natural leader and can funnel information to them. The educator is also there to listen when the leaders encounter problems in the community.

Conversely, the natural leader can educate the professional educator (and indirectly, the mainstream community) about his/her community. Neighborhood leaders know what kinds of programs are appropriate for the neighborhood. They know the needs of

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their community. The most important task of the professional educator may be to make the volunteers aware of how much they know and to encourage them to follow through on their own beliefs.

Because those living with limited economic resources cannot pay for food and transportation, the educator could design ways to respond to these basic programming needs. Equally significant is the limited emotional and spiritual energy available to volunteers living in disadvantaged situations. To respond to those needs, educators could use strategies that focus on mutual respect and encouragement.

The following specific strategies focus on encouragement:

1. Respect the Individual You Work With.

Families with limited financial resources are often in the position of waiting for everything: social workers, welfare checks, buses, housing repairs etc. Make sure you have the time to give to programming so you can fulfill your responsibilities in a timely fashion. . . Inconsistency and unkept promises give the discouraging message that you do not really take the program seriously.



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2. Recognize Efforts.

Do not wait until a volunteer comes to five sessions before noting his or her dedication to a program. Comment on the creative ways program participants have discovered to get babysitting or transportation - let them know you are aware of their efforts. Do not withhold praise and encouragement until a volunteer has made a major achievement in programming. Notice each step of the way - the building of trust, the consistent support. Remember that when volunteers help others, they are giving a part of their emotional self away; that missing emotional part can be replenished by the educator through encouraging remarks.

3. Display Effective Communication Skills.

Volunteers living in at-risk neighborhoods do not have much time to practice reflective listening skills. Yet in training sessions most appreciate the impact good listening and problem-solving skills achieve. Take time to teach these skills to volunteers. Remember, as the first link in the mentoring chain you must display the skills that really keep communication open.

4. Maintain confidentiality.

Communication will remain open only if sensitive issues are kept confidential. Poor families fear that shared personal problems may become a matter of public record. Once group members begin to speak frankly about their own lives or the lives of those with whom they are working, be sure to maintain their trust.

5. Keep Expectations Realistic and Break Tasks Down So They Are Achievable.

Change may not happen overnight. It will take some volunteers awhile to practice and learn new skills. Some barriers to change will never completely disappear. By noticing and praising even small positive changes, you will encourage those being trained and feel encouraged yourself.

Some goals, such as those related to high levels of unemployment, may be totally unrealistic to achieve, given the political and economic realities of the community. Be patient.

6. Project Faith in Your Volunteers.

Try not to give all the answers, even though it is very difficult sometimes! Remember, the more an individual is encouraged to rely on the educator, the less internal control he or she feels. Work with others to find solutions relevant to the community. Admit readily that you do not know the answer if you do not. If you have never lived in poverty, do not pretend that you now how it feels. Families struggling with limited resources find such attitudes patronizing and discouraging.





7. Respect the Strengths In Each Volunteer With Whom You Work.

Remind them of their strengths frequently. *These people may be unaware of how powerful they are.* The discouragement of poverty causes many to deny their talents and abilities. When trying to identify positive aspects of the Reagan cuts, Reverend William Payne said, "...It may enable us to rely on our own strengths which lay latent, like a sleeping giant." There are aspiring, talented artists in situations of poverty who have not been able to use their talents appropriately. There are caring, talented human service providers who have been told to take clerical courses or (in one case) lose their food stamps. By helping each volunteer discover his/her talents, you will be creating a powerful community offering excellent programs to neighborhood friends.

8. Find as Many Positives in a Negative Situation as Possible.

To those with limited resources, many barriers seem insurmountable. If the educator or the volunteer gets stuck on the negatives of the situation, there will be no movement - only discouragement. Find the solutions that do work and use each as an encouraging sign to keep moving upward.

9. Be Prepared with Programming, Resources, and Answers to Questions.

The more prepared you are, the more the volunteers will trust in your sincerity in wanting to make a difference.

10. Get to Know the Neighborhood in Which You are Working.

In every neighborhood there are individuals who view themselves as the leaders. In some cases, these leaders are caring individuals who want a good quality of life for all. In other cases, the leaders are survivors who control situations within the community, often to their own benefit. Understanding how the formal and informal leadership in a community operates is essential. If the volunteer associates the trainer with a local power structure that they view as oppressive or corrupt, then your effectiveness will be severely undermined. Even if the local power structure is popular, you will want to remain politically neutral. In general, powerful community leaders can be useful in helping you begin a program, but be careful not to present them as key players in the program's success.

Suggested Reading

Employment and Economic Problems. Catherine Chilman, Fred Cox, and Elam Nunnally. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1988.

Pedagogy of the Opressed. Paulo Friere. New York, NY: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1989.

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